

# RESEARCHING BY VET FOR VET: A STOCKTAKE/LESSONS LEARNT

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## ABSTRACT

For five years VEAC, a research centre situated within VET (TAFE NSW), has been conducting a wide range of research, evaluation and dissemination projects. The Centre's primary aim is to conduct and support applied research within TAFE and across the VET sector in order to promote leading edge information on assessment and training issues.

The conference provided an opportunity to reflect on our research to date in light of the questions posed by AVETRA, under the theme of "Quality and Diversity in VET Research".

## Introduction

As researchers we often reflect on individual projects but less often do we critically evaluate a body of work. Nor do we often have time to reflect on our role and purpose, our impact and influence on policy and practice, or our strategic directions. Most significantly for VET researchers, such reflections need to occur within the rapidly changing context of our practice.

Preparing this paper gave us the opportunity to consider in depth the changing needs and expectations of our customers and the implications for our Centre's future research activity and directions. Central to this analysis was consideration of what constitutes quality research within the broader context of national policy directions, changing workplace arrangements impacting on VET and changes within VET research practice and culture. We would propose that one of our key objectives is to consider how best we can ensure that the results of our research activity can lead to new knowledge and new approaches to VET by policy makers, practitioners and VET researchers.

As a result we would like to share with you some of our reflections under two broad questions:

- What are the main factors and questions influencing our Centre's research practice and directions?
- *What are the implications for VEAC's current and future directions as a VET research centre?*

## What are the Main Factors and Questions Influencing our Centre's Research Practice and Directions?

### WHAT IS QUALITY RESEARCH?

When considering this question a number of things came to mind. Firstly, for research to be perceived as representing quality it needs to be firmly grounded in context, both in terms of its process and its outcomes. In other words it should stem from a soundly constructed research question, it should examine the assumptions and contextual factors influencing its planning, conduct and analysis, and, most importantly, it should lead to new understandings and approaches to VET by policy makers, practitioners and VET researchers.

Further *quality indicators* for our research activity include:

- making a difference – ie. value, usefulness, utility, impact (both in direct and indirect terms)– particularly in terms of guidance for current practice and quality improvement at both policy and practitioner levels
- timeliness
- diversity – capable of reaching multiple audiences with multiple needs

- research which is capable of promoting collaborative, action learning frameworks for conducting research (with the aim of enhancing the quality, reputation, profile and research skill base of VET research conducted by VET practitioners)

Of course one of the biggest issues for us as researchers purporting to embrace such notions of *quality* is *how do we know we are doing quality research?* Part of our approach to this is to establish quality systems and mechanisms for review and feedback in order to maintain a strong focus on quality. Examples include:

- Independent Advisory Council for the Centre which focuses on the strategic directions of the Centre's activities in relation to the Centre's stated mission, its documented Business Plan and its customer and stakeholder needs.
- Establishment of a Reference Group for every project we undertake. This group comprises key stakeholders and its role is to guide and advise the research process.
- Criteria are also established for development of the research brief.
- Development of A Code of Research Ethics underpinning all activities.
- Quality systems for project management which include mechanisms for internal and external review of the research products, the research process and support structures, project officers, the project manager and the dissemination approaches.
- Regular customer surveys of key target groups and stakeholders.
- The formulation of a *VEAC Strategic Group* which comprises representatives from within TAFE NSW and aims to ensure that our research and related activities address key areas of internal customer need.

## THE NOTION OF RESEARCH AS LEARNING

People learn a lot from being actively involved in the research process. Collaborative approaches to research provide opportunities for those involved to learn more than research methodology. They find that it can also provide a forum for critical reflection, strategic review and the opportunity to develop and test new ways of *doing* and *knowing*. We believe that this is a very important core role for our Centre.

A number of our recent research projects have actively incorporated action learning approaches within the scope of the research methodology. A good example of this is the DETYA funded *VET in Senior Secondary Schools project* conducted in 1998. This project used a combination of process benchmarking and case study methodology to investigate the models used to integrate accredited VET curriculum, structured workplace training and general education within a number of senior secondary schools throughout Australia. Significantly, teachers from each of the targeted schools were involved with the VEAC researcher as *co-researchers*. This methodology opened up the possibilities for these researchers to actively engage in an action learning and benchmarking approach via a process they described as a *journey of discovery around the research question*.

The paradigm of learning which underpins this research approach rests on the assumption that the full benefits of learning cannot be fully realised unless learners are able to apply new knowledge to implement changes in their own workplace context.

The collaborative nature of this action learning approach provided increased opportunities for those involved in the research process to be exposed to multiple perspectives, and ultimately lead to new understandings and actions – on both a personal level (eg. enhanced research skills for co-researchers) and within their workplace community (eg. through the action and reflection associated with new approaches to the school community's VET practice). Of course, it was the provision of adequate funds that enabled this methodology to be fully utilised.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF VET RESEARCH — FOR VET BY VET

One further issue we are aware of as a VET based research agency is the significant higher education representation among government supported VET research. The higher education sector has a well established research culture and an infrastructure which actively supports and promotes research.

On the other hand, the VET sector is still developing a recognised and active research culture – particularly in terms of encouraging VET practitioners to embrace research as an integral part of their practice. VEAC firmly believes that promotion and support of practitioner grounded VET-based research must remain an integral part of its role.

With this in mind VEAC regards it as important to continue to capitalise on the strengths of a diverse VET research culture involving universities, TAFE, consultants and other research bodies. Examples to date include VEAC's long standing partnership with the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training at the University of Technology, Sydney (RCVET). Additionally, the Centre for Vocational Assessment Research (CVAR) was established in 1997 as an ANTA-supported cross sectoral initiative between VEAC and the Assessment Research Centre (ARC) at the University of Melbourne.

Finally, AVETRA, itself, has a key role to play in providing a forum for critique and for assisting the improvement of linkages between those involved in VET research across all sectors.

## THE NOTION OF INDEPENDENCE OF RESEARCH ACTIVITY

As a research centre in VET today it is impossible to deny the impact of funding sources and government (commonwealth and state) policies on the scope and impact of our research activity. A question for us to consider is how does being a funded centre impact on our independence in terms of our research priorities, scope, questions posed, methodologies, impact of findings on policy and practice, dissemination and utilisation approaches and so on.

Our research centre is based within the largest VET provider in Australia – TAFE NSW. Further it is located in (and accountable to) a specific Institute within that organisation. This reality has resulted in considerable reflection on our part on just what this means in terms of independence of our research activity. If, as stated earlier, we define quality research (in part) as research which is capable of leading to new understandings and actions, then the perception of independence is a central consideration to a research centre concerned with critique and improvement of current VET policy and practice. Issues we are currently attempting to address include:

- How do we balance our priorities and agendas with government funded and TAFE based (and even *host-Institute* based) priorities? How do we address the perception of independence of our research activity ie How can we best achieve a balance between the Centre's mission of a *VET wide* brief against the reality of being located within and financially supported by one of TAFE NSW's Institutes (this includes issues surrounding self funding targets, and balancing internal expectations, demands and priorities)?
- Closely linked to this is the notion of undertaking research within the political framework of a large government agency implementing the governmental policy agenda for VET. Issues for us as a VET research centre become more complex given that we are attempting to do evaluative, critical research within our own organisation.

Given such issues, VEAC must also continue to explore what benefits arise from being based within a VET provider and how to meet the challenges and constraints from this context. Most importantly, we need to continue to explore the question of how can we address these in ways that enable our Centre to achieve our strategic goals while meeting the needs of an increasingly complex customer and stakeholder base (which often involve competing interests).

## What are the implications for VEAC's current and future directions as a VET research centre?

### EVOLVING RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

We are exploring the boundaries and utility of a range of research approaches from *anecdotal* research to more critical, evaluative and empirically grounded approaches. For example, in some recent research, an NREC-funded project evaluating the contribution of competency based assessment to VET, we have attempted to extend the dimensions of the case study approach, by incorporating a range of methods to triangulate the evaluative data within a particular industry. Data from three 'industry case studies' was then further analysed on the basis of an evaluation model to seek out commonalities, differences, what was working well or not, among CBA users and industry sectors.

We have discussed the value of *collaborative research strategies* which involve VET practitioners in various kinds of action learning contexts, incorporated within the project methodology eg. *VET in Senior Secondary Schools* which combined a number of case studies with process benchmarking methodology. This is in keeping with the Centre's mission to provide action learning opportunities for

VET practitioners to undertake/ improve research skills with the broader aim of improving the quality and diversity of VET research and strengthening its research culture.

## **DISSEMINATION AND UTILISATION STRATEGIES**

Research by our Centre into our customers' needs regarding utilisation approaches supports NREC's findings that the 60 page report has a very limited use and audience. While there is still merit in documenting clearly the whole research process and outcomes, there is also a need for more diversity in dissemination products and strategies.

VEAC has developed an upfront focus on end users needs and is actively addressing the diversity of products and dissemination strategies explicitly at the project planning stage. This includes the scope to refine and review our initial assumptions about products and dissemination strategies throughout the life of the project.

Examples include an investigation of the effectiveness of workplace assessment, *Assessment Works* (1997). Through the conduct of the research it became apparent that its potential users (mainly assessors and trainers/teachers) could benefit from a 'hands-on' product that could provide guidance on developing and implementing workplace assessment (systems). Thus, an *Assessment Works Kit* was produced, as well as a standard report.

Another earlier example *Key Competencies in Industry* involved a number of industries and specific enterprises in identifying good practice in the implementation of key competencies in training and assessment in the workplace. Dissemination in this project involved responding to research participant and user feedback throughout the project process and resulted in the production of an enterprise focused booklet, *Creating Lifelong Learners in your Workplace*, and the conduct of a seminar focusing on the project outcomes and involving key personnel from participant sites as an industry panel to share their experiences with the seminar participants.

VEAC continues to refine and develop more creative ways of seeking and acting upon customer needs, expectations and research priorities. Through this we aim to improve our audiences' accessibility to and use of the outcomes of our research. One model, which we will be building upon in 1999, is the *Research Roadshow* concept. In 1997, staff from the Centre developed an interactive workshop for TAFE head teachers which was then conducted in almost every TAFE NSW institute. The aim of these workshops was to inform practitioners about a selection of our research and through a problem-solving delivery approach, enable them to apply the research findings to their daily practice. These workshops were very well received and have provided a model for future application.

Our position within a VET culture which favours pragmatism and applied research, allows VEAC considerable opportunity and support to implement and evaluate innovative strategies for dissemination such as those described above.

## **VEAC PARTNERSHIPS AND LINKAGES**

The VET context is dynamic, complex and multifaceted. This contributes to the need for researchers to stop, reflect and, as Boud et al (1998) note, adopt a more strategic, more critical, more evaluative focus. We acknowledge the limited impact current VET research has had on informing (and, indeed, challenging) policy. One clear direction we need to address is that of strengthening our linkages with individuals and agencies in order to facilitate greater consideration of our research outcomes within the policy context of VET.

This notion of VET research having an impact on VET policy, practice and performance was captured in the papers by C. & J Selby Smith and R. McDonald at last year's AVETRA conference (1998). In both papers impact is defined in terms of use and influence. Within this discussion, Selby Smith et al (1998, 33) noted that an emphasis on dissemination alone was insufficient and stressed the importance of strong linkages to the impact of VET research:

Dissemination activities are more easily identifiable, for example when considered in relation to particular research projects; but their effectiveness is enhanced when they operate in the context of a strong web of linkages... To stress the concept of linkages is to be concerned with facilitating the establishment of multiple areas of collaboration between the researchers and users (and other groups), given the multiple pathways through which research can influence policy and practice.....

For VEAC this partly translates into a strengthening and expansion of existing networks which can serve as a forum for critique of current and future VET policy and practice. A recent example is the establishment of the VEAC Strategic Group (VSG) – a forum of key TAFE stakeholders which was implemented in response to internal customer feedback concerning a preference for closer linkages with our Centre. The VSG is designed to enhance collaboration with our key internal partners in areas such as research planning, conduct, dissemination and critique. These type of linkages also open up possibilities in terms of enhancing the skill base and profile of VET research within a VET context such as TAFE. The VSG provides VEAC with extended linkages into areas such as delivery, educational planning, commercial activity, staff training and development and policy.

In addition to these, VEAC recognises the importance of looking at the complexity and diversity of VET and explore linkages which look beyond the immediate education and training cross sectoral partners into related fields such as Human Resources and Industrial Relations.

## VET RESEARCH CULTURE

As we have stated in the first section of this paper, a central objective of our Centre has been to enhance the research skills base of VET practitioners and improve the quality and diversity of VET research in TAFE through collaborative research methodologies and forums.

We want to continue this practice – to find ways to:

- promote critical reflection leading to new knowledge and new approaches to VET by policy makers, practitioners and VET researchers.
- improve the quality, diversity and credibility of VET based research.
- help build and support an effective culture of research within VET, particularly within the TAFE sector by demystifying *research* and promoting innovative and effective ways for practitioners to evaluate and explore approaches to learning and assessment.

AVETRA provides us with an ideal forum for debate and exploration concerning what is shaping our identities as VET researchers and in determining what culture of research we want to create. As noted by John McIntyre and Mary Barrett in last year's AVETRA conference proceedings (1998:3):

Now that AVETRA has been successfully established, perhaps it is time to begin to engage in more critical examination of the emerging research culture, not only in terms of its differences from education at large, but also in terms of its linkages and commonalities.

## Conclusion

No organisation can afford to stand still in the current political, economic and cultural climate. VEAC has used the opportunity of the 1999 AVETRA Conference to reflect on how successfully we are currently addressing our customers needs and research agendas. We have also suggested how we might improve our strategies for anticipating and meeting future needs and directions.

Part of moving forward in understanding and improving current VET policy and practice is ensuring that we take the time to critically examine the emerging trends and issues from a body of research (not just our own). We have often evaluated individual project outcomes but less frequently fully explored the connections, complexities and issues stemming from a body of VET research with the aim of generating new knowledge and understandings and creating forums for further critique.

The theme of AVETRA's 1999 conference, Quality and Diversity In VET Research, was timely for us to engage in further exploration of the factors shaping VET's research effort, agenda and culture.

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